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Randy Weston, Sonny Rollins, Dewey Redman and Charles Lloyd bring a rich history to the festival. They've inspired legions, but they also lovingly recall the people and places that formed the bedrock for their own music

Even masters have their mentors

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Randy Weston, 79, remembers his childhood in Brooklyn, going for milk and cookies at Max Roach's house or to his buddy Cecil Payne's place to meet Dizzy Gillespie.

In 1940s Harlem, saxophonist Sonny Rollins – who turns 75 in September – played in a high school band with Jackie McLean, Kenny Drew and Art Taylor, and received words of wisdom from the architects of bebop: Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell.

Saxophonist Dewey Redman, 74, recalls his high school marching band – from the only black school in segregated Fort Worth – that won the 1948 Texas championship, and included the future free-jazz revolutionary Ornette Coleman.

Saxophonist Charles Lloyd, 67, speaks of his parents putting up black musicians from the big bands that passed through Memphis when no hotels would take them.

The four veterans, still on top of their game, bring stories of their beginnings – and, thus, great beginnings in jazz – to this year's festival. Their voices over the phone crackle easily between past and present, traversing the swing era to the birth of bebop to free jazz – the time-tested improvisational languages of jazz.

"My first love was Coleman Hawkins, from hearing his hit Body and Soul on the radio," says pianist Weston. "Growing up in the African-American community in Brooklyn, music and sports was our life. We knew everything – who's the best saxophone player, Coleman Hawkins or Lester Young? Our parents introduced us to top-shelf music – be it gospel, opera, jazz, Cuban. In our neighbourhood there was no television, no disco – everything was live, and nobody locked their doors. We didn't call up to visit, we'd just knock on the door at Max's or Monk's house. Monk never gave me a piano lesson, but every day he gave me a piano lesson just being with him, going to rehearsals and concerts, spending time with him at home.

"Today there's a lot of electronics. Well, our masters were born with electricity. It was more than just notes, it was a way of life in the African-American community that produces music."

Rollins, whom many consider the greatest living improviser, remembers Fats Waller on the radio in the early 1930s being "a big force when I was 3 or 4 or 5, maybe before – you never know exactly when you absorb these influences as a child. He was a funny guy, a great entertainer, but also such a consummate musician."

Redman recalls sitting on the lawn in Fort Worth at age 6 and listening to the sounds of Duke Ellington and R&B jump band great Louis Jordan from the juke joint across the street.

Lloyd put his pillow over the radio at night so he wouldn't disturb the rest of the house. "Finally at midnight, I would get to hear Lady Day (Billie Holiday) – she was 'my' Lady I just knew that one day I'd get to New York to rescue her and take her away from all that pain and sorrow. But at the time, I couldn't even reach the gas pedal. When I did get there, it was too late.

"And to hear her with Prez (Lester Young), words would fail to give expression to my feelings. Prez, so tender, was like gossamer wings. Then there was Bird (Charlie Parker) flying through the air at the speed of light… They kept me company and gave me hope."

Back then, the now-timeless modern sounds of Parker and Monk took some getting used to. Redman lived across the street from a fan who'd bought Bird's first Dial records of 1947. "When I heard them, I said, 'C'mon, man, he don't play as good as Johnny Hodges!' Gradually I began to get hip to Bird."

Weston laughs when he says, "The first time I heard Dizzy and Bird, I said, 'What kind of music is that?' It was incredible, you know. But the beautiful part of that generation was that Charlie Parker played with Jay McShann, and Dizzy Gillespie with Cab Calloway. Monk played behind Coleman Hawkins. I realized that these so-called differences (in styles) are not really there. From Louis Armstrong all the way up until now. For me it's all equal music that describes what the scene was like.

"But first time I heard Monk, I didn't think he could play no piano! I went to hear him on 52nd St., and I guess Monk was kinda 'relaxed' that night – he didn't play many notes – and I sat at the bar and said, 'What's happening with this guy?' But Hawkins was my guide – you can't go wrong with him – and if Coleman Hawkins has got Monk (in his band), something's going on. I went back, and he blew my mind. I decided that's what I'd like to do on the piano – get that magic and mystery that Monk was able to get. After that, I hung out three years with him."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

Sonny Rollins (left) remembers Charlie Parker as a father figure, not the depressive figure promoted by the biopic Bird. Dewey Redman (right) was a high-school friend of Ornette Coleman, but didn't think the free-jazz sensation's music was unusual: "We didn't know until later that nobody else played like that."

> **"First time I heard Monk, I didn't think he could play no piano!"**
> Randy Weston

Rollins grew up worshipping Parker, who died 50 years ago last March 12 at age 35. While Bird was also the most famous heroin addict in jazz – spawning a generation of junior junkies, like Rollins (who quickly cleaned up) – he "was more like a father figure to me and all the young guys," says Rollins. "That's why it was so hard on him when he saw his followers beginning to use drugs and everything like he did. That's what I discerned, that it was a very difficult thing for him to see."

The depressive personality promoted by director Clint Eastwood in his 1988 biopic Bird was not the one Rollins knew. "He always treated me in an avuncular manner. I think there were things he was sort of ashamed of, but to us he was very normal and he tried to present that aspect of himself to his followers."

Rollins worked more often with Monk – including the seminal album Brilliant Corners (1956) – and while he "might've seemed a little bit odd to some people," he was "a very honest person, a very sensitive person who really helped me a lot," says Rollins.

"You must remember that Monk and these men had a lot of travails because they were marginalized by the music industry. In their music and as people, they were trying to be individuals," as opposed to being members of a big band dutifully playing charts. "There was a social context through which you have to also look at their lives, as being an oppressed group," racially and musically. "They had to live in a society in which they were demonized and everything else. At the same time, they made this great music that many people were just ecstatic about. So that led to a schizophrenic life in some way."

It was a life that Redman, in Texas, wanted no part of. He observed the big-band musicians passing through town "crammming into cars afterwards to get to the next town, trying to find the black hotel, if there was one. I didn't want to do that, so I went to college with the idea of teaching."

But he developed a big, dark sound, and locals encouraged him to follow his high school buddy Ornette to New York, where Coleman set the jazz world aflame in 1959 with so-called free jazz.

"Even in high school, Ornette was a great artist. When he blossomed and began to sound like Ornette Coleman, we didn't think it was anything unusual. That's just the way he played. We didn't know until later that nobody else played like that."

Redman figured he'd play for five years in New York, then return to Texas and teach. But first he went to California to look for his father, whom he hadn't seen in 15 years, and wound up staying in the Bay Area for seven years (Joshua Redman, his more famous son, was born in Berkeley in 1969). He finally made it to New York in 1967, where Coleman offered him a job. After seven years, he joined pianist Keith Jarrett's American quartet with Charlie Haden and Paul Motian for another seven years.

It was with Lloyd's late-1960s quartet that Jarrett blossomed, in a group adored by the psychedelic crowd. Indeed, Lloyd is sensitive to the bad rap "West Coast jazz" has in some circles, although it spawned revolutionaries like Ornette, Charles Mingus and Eric Dolphy.

"Yes, it is bothersome … the past few years how I have been labelled the 'hippie's musician.' I don't know what that means or implies… True, I live here (in California). It is paradise, and the beauty of the nature here strongly impacts my work. But my crucial and formative years were in Memphis and Mississippi on my grandfather's farm." He takes solace in the words of childhood friend Billy Higgins, the drummer who started out with Ornette and finished with Lloyd: "You still got mud on your shoes."

Meanwhile, Rollins became notorious for never being satisfied ("I try, that's what I do"), which led to his famous two-year sabbatical from performing starting in 1959, when he could be found at night practising on the Williamsburg Bridge.

> **"My crucial and formative years were … on my grandfather's farm."**
> Charles Lloyd

"True, I am a perfectionist, but I'm somewhat of a self-taught musician. My older brother and sister both had a formal music education. I didn't want to go that route – until I began trying to play the saxophone. I wish I had their musical knowledge in my hands. So all my career, I've been striving to better myself. I consider myself like a work in progress – I'm never really there, you know. I think that's pervaded my outlook my whole career. So when I went on the bridge, trying to brush up on some horn techniques, it was just a chance to get myself a little better prepared."

Acclaim never meant much to him, "because I'm a person who's always tried to seek my own counsel. And I kind of realized the public is fickle. I …ave inside myself I needed to get some more work done on my own playing. So that's why I did what I did, and I've always tried to lead my life that way – trying to do what I think is the best thing, regardless of what people might say."

Weston says his father told him early on that "I was an African born in America. He said, 'To understand me, you have to learn about Africa when it was great.' So I grew up in a house with books on African civilization, African kings, the whole bit, completely contrary to what I got in the school system."

In the early 1960s, he became one of the first American musicians to live in Africa, "to understand more about myself and our people. I found out by just being with the oldest people I could find, listening to their stories like I did with Monk or Eubie Blake, that these rhythms – which we called different names, like jazz, blues, samba – were just African music. You look at Brazil, Cuba, Venezuela, Peru and Mexico and the United States – everywhere you find African people; they're simply carrying on rhythms from thousands of years ago. Based on spirituality and love, these rhythms have made people happy all over the planet in different forms."

At this year's festival, Weston will perform a tribute to Chano Pozo, the Afro-Cuban drummer who played with Dizzy's 1940s Latin-jazz orchestra and died young in a knifing. He will be accompanied by 80-year-old guest percussionist Candido, an acolyte of Pozo who played on Charlie Parker's Afro-Cuban sides.

"There's still a lot I don't understand, because these people deal with music totally with Mother Nature," Weston said. "It's very deep, preblues, timeless. Who was Monk's grandmother, Art Tatum's grandfather – where do these people come from with this beautiful music? It didn't just come out of thin air. We all come from this music and this continent, all of us have blood from there, and these rhythms, sounds and colours bring us together.

"Before Louis Armstrong, you know, white people and black people couldn't play together. Louis played that horn, man, and broke those barriers down, see."

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Where they're playing, and what to play

Randy Weston
Born: Brooklyn, 1926
In concert: July 2, 9:30 p.m., Spectrum, with African Rhythms Trio and Candido, $34.50.
CDs: Little Niles (UA, 1958): Spotlights early catholic taste in standards. The Spirits of Our Ancestors (Verve, 1991): Like a sweeping tone poem, beautifully arranged by Melba Liston.

Sonny Rollins
Born: New York, 1930
In concert: July 6, 8:30 p.m., Salle Wilfrid Pelletier, Place des Arts, $44.50 to $59.50.
CDs: Saxophone Colossus (OJC, 1956): The album every sax student passes through. A Night at the Village Vanguard (Blue Note, 1957): An indefatigably fertile trio date. This Is What I Do (Milestone, 2000): The burnished solos by now have a classic air, aged and distilled.

Dewey Redman
Born: Fort Worth, Tex., 1931
In concert: July 8, 10:30 p.m., Salles du Gesù, with Pat Metheny (+ 80/81 Revisited, $42.50; July 9, 10:30 p.m., Salles du Gesù, with his quartet, $52.50.
CDs: Tarik (Varese/Actuel, 1969): Rugged Texas roots are never far from this session, ranging from hard-bop to free. Choices (Enja, 1992): Friendly competition with son Joshua. In London (Palmetto, 1996): Reveals latter-day all-around wisdom.

Charles Lloyd
Born: Memphis, 1938
In concert: Friday, 9:30 p.m., Spectrum, in a quartet with Geri Allen, Larry Grenadier and Eric Harland, $34.50; July 2, 7:30 p.m., Monument National, with Zakir Hussain and Harland, $32.50 to $39.50.
CDs: Dream Weaver (Colectibles, 1966) and Forest Flower (Rhino, 1968): So-called "hippie jazz" that's held up surprisingly well. Lloyd made a remarkable comeback 30 years later with The Water Is Wide (1999) and Hyperion with Higgins (ECM, 2000), featuring Brad Mehldau, Larry Grenadier, Billy Higgins and John Abercrombie.

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